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AUTHOR Starnes, Bobby Ann
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ABSTRACT

The Foxfire approach to teaching and learning emerged from an experiential education program that used oral history methods to teach English to high school freshmen in Appalachian Georgia. In the 30 years since that program began, hundreds of teachers have helped develop and revise Foxfire's 11 core practices. This digest describes the Foxfire approach to teaching and learning as defined by the core practices, the decision-making framework the approach provides to teachers, and the ways that the framework fits with John Dewey's notion of experiential education. The core practices call for infusing all work with learner choice and design; the teacher as collaborator or facilitator; academic integrity of the work; work characterized by active learning; emphasis on peer teaching, small group work, and teamwork; connections between classroom work and the real world; audience beyond the teacher for student work; basing new activities on past learning experiences; encouragement of imagination and creativity in the completion of learning activities; student reflection on the work; and rigorous, ongoing evaluation. Over 50 years ago, Dewey expressed the belief that "all genuine education comes through experience." The 11 core practices are compared to Dewey's ideas about four aspects of education: the relationships among teachers, learners, the curriculum, and the community; the ways learning occurs; preparing students for full lives as citizens and individuals; and reflection and evaluation. Contains 11 references. (SV)

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by Bobby Ann Starnes

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools

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The Foxfire Approach to Teaching and Learning: John Dewey, Experiential Learning, and the Core Practices

by Bobby Ann Starnes

The student-produced *Foxfire Magazine* and a series of books on Appalachian life and folkways are popular manifestations of an experiential education program originally intended to teach basic English skills to high school freshmen in Appalachian Georgia. The Foxfire Approach to Teaching and Learning emerged from those classroom experiences. It evolved as a result of efforts to understand and replicate the project's success in helping learners meet curricular mandates (Wigginton, 1989).

Over time, hundreds of teachers have helped develop, edit, and revise Foxfire's 11 core practices to reflect new understandings and lessons learned through implementation. The core practices remain dynamic, and the work begun more than 30 years ago continues to expand and evolve.

This Digest describes the Foxfire Approach to Teaching and Learning as defined by the core practices, the decision-making framework the approach provides for teachers, and the ways the framework fits with John Dewey's notion of experiential education.

Core Practices: An Educational Framework

The core practices are: (1) The work teachers and learners do together is infused from the beginning with learner choice, design, and revision. (2) The role of the teacher is that of facilitator and collaborator. (3) The academic integrity of the work teachers and learners do together is clear. (4) The work is characterized by active learning. (5) Peer teaching, small group work, and teamwork are all consistent features of classroom activities. (6) Connections between the classroom work, the surrounding communities, and the world beyond the community are clear. (7) There is an audience beyond the teacher for learner work. (8) New activities spiral gracefully out of the old, incorporating lessons learned from past experiences, building on skills and understandings that can now be amplified. (9) Imagination and creativity are encouraged in the completion of learning activities. (10) Reflection is an essential activity that takes place at key points throughout the work. (11) The work teachers and learners do together includes rigorous, ongoing assessment and evaluation (Starnes, Paris, & Stevens, 1999).

This framework allows teachers to weave fragmented pieces of classroom life into an integrated whole, providing guidance in implementing mandated activities that do not fit together easily or well. In this process, a cohesive approach emerges to help teachers construct rich, meaningful, experience-based educational environments. When

applied as a way of thinking rather than a way of doing, the core practices make the complexities of teaching decisions explicit and manageable (Starnes, Paris, & Stevens, 1999).

Finding Dewey in the Foxfire Approach

Over half a century ago, Dewey (1938) expressed the belief that "all genuine education comes through experience" (p. 25). Since then, many educators have struggled with the complex implications of that simply stated notion. Recognizing its complexity, Dewey advised using "those cases in which we find there is a real development of desirable [experiences] . . . to find out how this development took place" (p. 4) and using this new understanding to make our efforts at teaching and learning.

In the spirit of Dewey, "desirable" teaching and learning experiences of hundreds of teachers were used to develop and refine the core practices of the Foxfire Approach. Let us examine the interrelationship between the core practices and Dewey's theories related to four aspects of education:

1. the relationships among teachers, learners, the curriculum, and community;
2. the ways learning occurs;
3. preparing for lives as citizens and individuals; and
4. thinking about what is learned and how.

The relationships among teachers, learners, the curriculum, and community. For this discussion we focus on four core practices: Student choice, teacher as facilitator, academic integrity, and community connections (numbers 1, 2, 3, and 6). The Foxfire Approach is learner centered and community focused. Implementing it requires a give-and-take relationship among teachers, learners, the curriculum, and community. Teachers constantly strive to increase learners' participation in decisions that affect them, integrate the curriculum into the community, and ensure that learning objectives are met or surpassed. In this process, these four core practices become so interwoven they are inseparable (Starnes & Paris, in press).

Dewey often wrote about these same interwoven relationships (1902, 1933, 1964). He advocated placing the learner at the center of experiences, and defined the teacher as the learner's "co-partner and guide in a common enterprise—the child's education as an independent learner and thinker" (1964, p. 10). He also called for an organic connection between the school and community (1899, p. 76), assuming it necessary for school experiences to bear some relationship to a child's experiences at home.

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How learning occurs. We focus here on active learning, audience, and spiraling (core practices 4, 7, and 8). Dewey (1933) saw the human mind as a meaning-making organ, relentlessly driven to make sense of its world—an idea that predates today's notions of constructivism and active learning (Teets & Starnes, 1997). The core practices also define the most powerful learning experiences as those that engage learners in posing and solving problems, making meaning, producing products, and building understandings.

Another intersection of Dewey's theories and the Foxfire Approach is purpose: For what purpose is the content to be learned? Core practice 7 calls for "an audience beyond the teacher" that the learners want to serve or engage to affirm the work is important, needed, and worth doing. When audience is central, course content takes on new and deeper purpose.

In core practice 8, *spiraling*, the Foxfire Approach emphasizes what Dewey referred to as "the continuous spiral" (1938, p. 39). He forcefully stressed the need for activities to be linked cumulatively, defining educative experiences as those that give rise to the learner's need to gather more facts, become more skilled, and use lessons learned in one experience as the basis for future experiences.

Preparing for full lives as citizens and individuals. Core practices 5 and 9 call for inclusion and teamwork, and creativity and innovation. To live rich and fulfilling lives as citizens and individuals, learners must be prepared for and have access to choices that affect their futures. But the purpose for learning does not lie only in the future; skills, knowledge, and experiences must have meaning in the present, too. Dewey believed skills must be useful "in the here and now" (1938, p. 18) and "make . . . an individual more capable of self-support and self-respecting independence" (1934, p. 11).

Although each core practice contributes to this self-respecting independence, two seem especially important. Core practice 9, *imagination and creativity*, applies Dewey's belief that imagination "designates a quality that animates and pervades all . . . meaning making and observation," allowing learners to make connections and see possibilities that may not be evident without "the adventure . . . of mind [meeting] universe" (1934/59, pp. 271-272).

Core practice 5 calls for belonging, or building experiences in which every learner is not only included, but needed, and emphasizes the value of teamwork. Both inclusion and teamwork are necessary for meeting the social, professional, and daily living requirements that Dewey referred to as building a "common and shared life..." (1964, p. 11).

Thinking about what is learned and how. Finally, core practice 10 calls for *reflection*, while core practice 11 calls for *evaluation and assessment*. Teachers using the Foxfire Approach are careful to plan time for learners to stand apart from their work to reflect consciously on what they have learned and how they have learned it. Building reflective environments increases the transfer of knowledge and enables teachers and learners to engage in rigorous, ongoing assessment and evaluation. Because these activities take place at key points during a study—rather than just at the completion—they evoke insight and give rise to revisions

and refinements critical to improving learning and addressing accountability.

Dewey considered reflection central to all learning experiences, enabling "us to act in a deliberate and intentional fashion . . . [to] convert action that is merely . . . blind and impulsive into intelligent action" (1933, p. 212). In calling for educational experiences that open possibilities for all, Dewey recognized the need for building learning experiences upon a firm understanding of what learners know, what they need to know, and how they come to know.

Conclusion

The Foxfire Approach has deep historical and philosophical roots. The connections between the Foxfire Approach and Dewey's vision of experiential education are clear. Today, Foxfire is recognized as one of the models for the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1998).

While its original emphasis was on teaching high school English through oral history, today's Foxfire Approach is used in all grade levels and all content areas. It enlivens the learning process by giving students and teachers rich experiences. The process bridges the theoretical perspective of Dewey's writings and the practical work of teaching. Through their interrelated nature, each adds to the understanding and power of the other, making genuine experience the driving and connecting force of classroom learning.

Resources

Information about *The Active Learner: A Foxfire Journal for Teachers*, the Foxfire Approach, services, and programs may be obtained by contacting the national office. E-mail foxfire@foxfire.org; phone 706-746-5828; Web page: www.foxfire.org.

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- Bobby Ann Starnes directs The Foxfire Fund, Inc. in Mountain City, Georgia.